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Bringing languages to life: a longitudinal study of the development of creative practice in student teachers of modern languages

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Abstract

This article reports the findings of a longitudinal study exploring the process of learning to teach modern languages in the changing landscape of teacher education. It employs a postmodern critical ethnographic methodology to examine the experiences of a group of student teachers over the course of a one-year postgraduate teacher education programme in England. The focus is on how experiences in university and in school encourage or discourage the development of creativity. The schools inspectorate, Ofsted, is critical of lifeless teaching which fails to inspire young people to learn languages. However, the pressures of 'performative' requirements act as a discouragement to creativity. The data indicates that whilst student teachers express a desire to be more creative, they find it difficult to implement their ideas in school. A post-structuralist analysis of Marx's theory of alienation is employed to argue that the early formation of professional identity is a process of acquiescence to oppressive external structures over which individuals have no control. The study concludes that it is possible to create spaces where the temporary suspension of alienation can allow individuals to put life back into language learning.

Keywords: Initial teacher education, modern languages, creativity, critical ethnography, alienation

Introduction

Student teachers, as they begin their professional education, often express their motivation to teach languages as a ‘passion’. They have spent time immersed in other cultures and languages and are enthusiastic with regard to sharing this knowledge and experience with their students (Barnes, 2005). However, evidence presented by the inspectorate, Ofsted, based on observations of language lessons in ninety secondary schools in England, suggests that this ‘passion’ is not always translated into classroom practice:

“...too often, the teaching was too uninspiring and did not bring the language to life for students” (Ofsted, 2011, p.5).

The consequences of this are evident in the fact that only half of young people choose to study a foreign language beyond the age of fourteen (Board & Tinsley, 2016). This has prompted calls for government intervention to prevent a critical skills deficit which may be detrimental to economic growth (Burns, 2016). ‘Lifeless’ teaching, it is argued in this paper, may also be a factor influencing the high number ML teachers choosing to leave the profession (Sellgren, 2017). This study investigates the process of learning to teach languages, exploring what happens between the moment a student begins the PGCE programme and the moment they emerge as a qualified teacher. Specifically, it asks how do people with a declared ‘passion’ for languages end up teaching dull and uninspiring lessons? In this paper, I propose that the early formation of professional identity is framed by neoliberal agendas which have brought about the curtailment of individual freedoms thereby limiting creativity in the classroom. The evidence presented from my work as a PGCE ML tutor suggests that the prevalence of performative requirements over ethical, professional judgement has acted to extinguish individual creativity resulting in a deadening of the experience of language learning for both teachers and students.

The environment within which student teachers develop a sense of a professional self is being transformed by the rise of neoliberal ideology. Education has become a commodity, which like any other, can be traded in the marketplace for money or status (Olssen et al., 2004, p.181). Within the ‘New Knowledge Economy’, what is accepted as ‘knowledge’ becomes more narrowly defined, giving rise to tensions in practice (Dale and Robertson, 2009). The idea that the study of other languages and cultures offers young people a broader world view and a means of connecting with people from other places becomes marginalized and language skills for business are prioritised. Ozga and Jones assert that the ‘failure of policy-makers to acknowledge the ambivalent and unstable nature of the Knowledge Economy contributes to a limited view of knowledge and loses sight of its capacity to create meaning and value beyond the marketplace’ (Ozga & Jones, 2006, p.8). Individuals, they point out, may indeed wish to engage in a ‘wider approach to and engagement with knowledge’ (ibid.), however, in a climate where education has become the servant of neoliberal agendas (Enever, 2009), the capacity for student teachers to exercise their own creativity is very limited. This, in turn, has impacted on the learning experiences of young people and seems likely to be a contributing factor to their rejection of language learning.

Policy Context

Defined by Olssen et al. as the ‘new authoritarian discourse of state management and control’, neoliberalism extends the reach of the market into all aspects of human interaction putting a value on and measuring the costs of all forms of human activity (Olssen et al., 2004,

p.172). Ball has argued that it is the advance of neoliberal ideology which has given rise to a managerial and technocratic culture in schools, replacing the professional autonomy and ethical judgements of the individual teacher with standardized 'norms' for the purpose of measuring performance. Drawing on Lyotard's (1984) notion of 'performativity', he explains how control is exercised through a system of 'terror': a 'regime of accountability that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of control, attrition and change' (Ball, 2008, p.49). This gives rise to a fear of being seen as inadequate, of not measuring up to someone else's idea of what it is to be a 'good teacher'. This constraining culture of performativity in schools has been highlighted as having a negative effect on creativity and professional autonomy (Robinson, 2011; Adnett & Hammersley-Fletcher, 2009). However, these critiques do not fully acknowledge the extent to which this is the inevitable outcome of a neoliberal ideology which seeks to impose an identity upon individuals.

Althusser's theory of the Ideological State Apparatus (Althusser, 1971/2001) offers a way of exploring the mechanisms whereby neoliberal ideology functions to deliberately extinguish creativity in order to exercise control and ensure social reproduction. Althusser makes the distinction between the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) which operate through violence (such as the Judiciary and the Military) and the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) which operate through Ideology (such as School and the Church) (Althusser, 1971/2001, p.97). The means by which the individual is recruited to an 'ISA' is via the mechanism of what Althusser called the 'interpellation of the subject'. He draws on Lacan's post-freudian theories to propose that individuals 'act out' the rituals of ideologies, thereby enabling the construction of an illusory sense of identity. Althusser's post-structural interpretation of Marx's theory of alienation allows for the existence of oppressive structures which is non-foundational. ISAs are not 'ready-made' but come into being as material practices (Althusser, 1970/2001, p.112). The ideas and representations upon which they are based do not have a 'spiritual' existence but are wholly material. They are constantly made and remade by those participating in them. As participants in ITE, my students and I find ourselves subscribing to the 'material practices' which constitute the ISA of teacher education. Althusser notes that all ISAs use suitable methods to discipline their members (ibid., p.98), and so, in fear of being 'cast out', of losing our jobs or failing to meet the requirements for Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) we continue grading, measuring, assessing, thereby upholding the very structures which oppress and alienate us. Althusser's re-reading of Marx centres on the idea that the worker is always dominated by powers and structures external to the self; we are shaped by the structures within which we live. Althusser singles out School as the dominant ISA which functions to reproduce the 'relations of production' and exploitation (Althusser, 1970/2001, p.104). 'Good teachers', he says, are forced to work in a system which is bigger than they are and which crushes them. They 'put all their heart and ingenuity' into performing their job, and are unaware that it is their own 'devotion' which contributes to the 'maintenance and nourishment of this ideological representation of the School' (ibid. p.106). Thus the individual teacher is complicit, albeit unwittingly, in the maintenance of oppressive structures of which 'performativity' is one specific manifestation. Ball's foucauldian analysis of the work of teachers suggests that they are 'entrapped' into taking responsibility for their own 'disciplining' and are urged to believe that their commitment to such processes will make them more professional (Ball, 2008, p.58).

One of the consequences of this is the diminishment of subject pedagogy. Lingard (2009) refers to several studies which demonstrate how the quality of education is being reduced by a narrow, technicised view of education. He argues that this has effected a 'thinning out' of pedagogy and challenged the potential for more 'authentic' pedagogies (Lingard, 2009, p.81). Pedagogy, he points out, remains an individual and local concern in opposition to the

universalizing standardization of policy. It rests upon the professional and ethical judgements of the individual teacher as opposed to the implementation of generalized teaching strategies. Modern Languages pedagogy draws on a robust body of research which emphasizes the key importance of spontaneous language use (Mitchell, 2003). However, the demise of subject specific pedagogy and its replacement with a generalised ‘science’ of learning (Hardcastle & Lambert, 2007, in Pachler, Evans & Lawes, 2007, p.x) in order to facilitate the measurement of teacher effectiveness, has marginalized the key principles of second language acquisition. It has been noted, for example, that there is very little verbal spontaneity in language lessons and written role plays pass for ‘speaking activities’ (Ofsted, 2011, p.24). Ofsted has berated students’ inability to ‘speak creatively or beyond the topic they were studying by making up their own sentences in an unrehearsed situation’ (Ofsted, 2008). The diminished use of the use of the Target Language (TL) by teachers and their students has been a focus of concern in recent years. Chambers’ (2013) study of a group of PGCE student teachers found that whilst they agreed with the principles of TL and had the linguistic competence to use it, they were unable to sustain it in practice. This was due to the priority accorded to generic pedagogies which emphasise short term goals and militate against a view of language learning as a long-term project which is a pre-condition for sustained use of the TL (Pachler et al., 2007, p.31).

The student-teachers in this study participated in a series of university seminars designed to promote the creative use of the TL within authentic, cultural contexts. These included drama; songs; games; poetry; music; art; drawing; film; story-telling; magic tricks dance and culture. Following the seminars, the students and I collated a list of suggestions for developing creativity in ML lessons which was intended to support experimentation with creative, multi-sensory pedagogical approaches which allow for responses which are not limited to the linguistic (Pachler, Barnes & Field, 2009, p.153). Such approaches are not the ‘norm’ in the ML classroom and are likely to bring student teachers into conflict with what they observe in school. Student teachers, however, are reluctant to challenge the way things are done in school (Raffo and Hall, 2006) leading to the replication of ineffective practices. The influence of the university in promoting broader forms of professional learning which promote criticality and creativity (BERA/RSA, 2014) has been undermined by recent policies which have sought to reposition ITE as an apprenticeship model under the direction of schools (Brighouse, 2013). The conceptualization of teaching as a craft or technical skill neglects the centrality of the capacity for critical reflection which is the ‘insight that comes from interrogating one’s own practice’ (BERA/RSA, 2014, p.20). The Standards for QTS, arguably, exacerbate this by encouraging a superficial engagement with subject pedagogy (Calderhead & Shorrock, 1997, in Pachler et al., 2007, p.43). The effect of this has been to diminish individual agency, narrowing the possibilities open to student teachers to make language learning a meaningful and creative experience for themselves and their pupils.

Creativity as an expression of liberty: theoretical perspectives

Marx’s theory of the commodity offers a way of understanding how student teachers experience their work in an environment where ‘Language Learning’ and ‘Teacher Education’ have become objectified and removed from the human beings participating in them. Capitalism, in replacing ‘use value’ with ‘exchange value’ separates the worker from their labour bringing about a state of alienation (Marx, 1844/1992, p.330). Marx draws on Hegel’s idea of ‘Gattungswesen’ (‘species being’) from *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (1807) as a way of conceptualising human creativity. According to Marx, we are creative beings and in separating our creative activity from our ‘Gattungswesen’, we bring about our own alienation (Petrovic, 1963, p.421). In his critique of the commodity, Marx drew on the philosophy of

aesthetics to demonstrate how the object as exchange value is abstracted from its sensuous particularity in order to make it exchangeable for any other commodity' (Bowie, 2003, p.61). According to Bowie, this has given rise to a 'crisis of meaning' where the relationship between the 'unique' individual and the 'external' world is uncertain. We experience this as a 'loss of particularity' to an imagined external reality which can be explained by generalizable laws. Art presents a challenge to scientific rationality because it 'lives from its particularity, which is not reducible to conceptual generalisation' (ibid., p.5). Art implies an individual human subject and the human capacity to create and appreciate Art presents a challenge to the view that we can understand ourselves and the world around us only through scientific rationality. It draws on the imagination to produce images of what the world could look like if we were to 'realize our freedom and thus establish a more appropriate relationship to the rest of nature' (ibid.). I propose that what is termed 'creative practice' in ML quite simply an attempt by student teachers and me, as their tutor, to reconnect the 'Gattungswesen' to the work we do, an attempt to insist on enjoyment in the (po) face of killjoy policies which sap human creativity, and deny us our connections with each other.

Research Aims

Research on the professional development of language teachers has tended to be focused on 'cognition'; on how knowledge and beliefs about specific aspects of language teaching, such as grammar, influences decision making (Borg, 2003, p.98). Borg suggests that this has led to a neglect of the political social and cultural contexts which influence teachers' decision making. Kanno and Stuart (2010) draw attention to the lack of studies addressing novice ML teachers' long term development, a gap which this study aims to address. The study is framed by the following questions: how do student teachers view creativity in the context of language teaching? What do they think it is? Are they motivated to experiment with creative approaches? What opportunities do they have to develop creative practice in school? How do they view the tensions between creativity and performative requirements and its effect on their emerging professional identities?

Research Methodology and Ethics

The study follows one cohort of eleven student teachers through their PGCE year, gathering data through observation, individual semi-structured interviews and naturally occurring data including assignments and reflections. An open text questionnaire was completed at the end of the programme which asked the following questions: how important is creativity in language lessons? Did the 'creativity list' encourage you to be more creative? Were you encouraged to be creative by your mentors in school? Did you feel your own creativity was restricted in any way? The research design evolved over the course of the year and was divided into four phases. The data gathered from each phase were used to inform the design of the next (Hammersly and Atkinson, 2007):

	Programme stage	Data collected
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PHASE 1	Course induction	Personal philosophies of teaching and learning languages
PHASE 2	2 week university programme of seminars focusing on creative practice at end of school practicum 1	Recordings of: 1) a drama workshop and group discussion 2) a creativity seminar
PHASE 3	School Practicum 2	Focused observations of creativity in lessons in school (n=7) Follow up Interviews (n=7)
PHASE 4	End of course	Questionnaires (n=11) Recording of group discussion

Observations took place during the normal course of my school visits and seven were selected as a representative sample. I did not inform students that, in addition to the normal observation, I would be focusing on creative aspects of the lesson as this may have put additional pressure on them to perform and would not have captured their authentic experiences. Following the observation, I emailed the student my reflective analysis of the lesson focusing on creativity, inviting them to discuss this with me. Reflexivity (Pillow, 2010) is a key feature of the methodology of this study and the critical narrative arises out of my reflections on my own experiences and that of my students. It as an explicitly personal interpretation, where validity is conceived not as a ‘regime of truth’ but as an ‘incitement to discourse’ (Lather, 1993, p.674). All names are pseudonyms.

Presentation and analysis of the data

One of the most notable findings is that creativity is seen by the student teachers as being disconnected from ‘normal’ ML practice but connected to ‘real life’ or embodied experiences. Creativity is viewed as a desirable ‘added extra’, a luxury rather than an integral part of ML practice. In commodifying their own creativity, the student teachers have brought about their own self-alienation through the separation of their work from their ‘Gattungswesen’, or sense of being human. The data reveal how student teachers’ sense of their own agency diminished as they progressed through the programme. They gradually became more pragmatic (or cynical) with regard to the parameters of creativity in language teaching, accepting the limitations imposed by external influences. The following reflections from Gemma illustrate this change in attitude between the start and the end of the programme respectively:

‘My aim is to make exciting, active, enjoyable and fun lessons which challenge all students. I want to inspire students and help them understand that languages will give them powers and open doors in the future.’ (Personal philosophy)

‘The important thing is to create a love for learning, but on the flipside there is also the requirement to make progress.’ (Group discussion)

The need to create a ‘love of learning’ has been placed in opposition to ‘the requirement to make progress’; the former being ‘important’ but the latter a

‘requirement’. Gemma articulates the ethical dilemma she faces where she acknowledges that a ‘love of learning’ is secondary to the need to demonstrate that her students have made progress in order to meet performative requirements. The student teachers conceptualized creativity as being linked to ‘real life’ or embodied experiences which have been removed from language learning through the process of alienation. ‘Creativity’ symbolises that which is absent from ‘normal’ lessons and can be understood in terms of ‘sensuous particularity’, or the individual imaginative articulation of the object (Bowie, 2008, p.61). The idea of sensuous particularity unifies the themes which emerge from the data: creativity is seen as being aesthetic; physical; spontaneous; an expression of individual freedom; imaginative; enjoyable and connected to real life and to culture. All of these aspects of experience require a particularised subject which cannot be quantified, pre-determined or standardised. Gemma, for example, suggests that allowing students to use hand gestures was constitutive of creative practice because it allowed students to make connections with real life experience thereby making ML more accessible:

‘.....they have got this myth that languages are tricky. But if you put a creative slant on it, they can....French people express themselves so creatively, you know, they use hand gestures. If you give them the freedom to do that, it’s really important.’
(Interview)

Gemma, I would suggest, sees creativity as the human aspect of language which is missing from the technical-rational view which dominates practice. It seems a little sad that something as small as a hand gesture is seen as an expression of ‘freedom’ requiring the permission of the teacher. The view that opportunities for self-expression were rare in language lessons was common. The following comment, made by Joe, expresses the frustration shared by many of his fellow students with regard to the limitations of the curriculum:

‘What is the point of saying a whole load of random sentences somebody wants you to say? Surely the point of it is to be able to express yourself in some way.....they have got to be able to say what they are feeling.’(Interview)

A recurring theme was that creativity described a connection to the world outside the classroom, which was missing from the ‘usual’ language lessons. In response to my question ‘what is creativity in language lessons?’ Chloë said:

‘It is adding life into language teaching and learning. It enhances enjoyment for everybody’. (Interview)

Life has been removed from learning, and ‘creativity’ represents an attempt to reinstate it. To reiterate the words of Marx (1844): within the framework of exchange value ‘My labour is not life’ and hence the absence of joy. Joe offered the following analysis:

‘Any kind of context is creativity. Any time they can use language for their own purposes and not just because it’s in a textbook, is creativity.’ (Group discussion)

Joe’s insights have been informed by his experiences of two school placements at the end of which he seems to have settled upon a more pragmatic view of creativity as ‘context’, which he links to real life experiences. His argument that any real use of language outside the textbook is creative seems indicative of how very narrow the spaces for creativity have become. Joe has an awareness of the separation of the human activity of language learning

from ML as a school subject, and this is the source of some frustration for him. It is, I contend, evidence of his alienation from his work.

The absence and presence of enjoyment is a theme running through the data. All of the students expressed a desire to make language learning an enjoyable experience and saw creativity as a solution to pupil boredom and disaffection. Joe comments that much of the content of ML lessons is a joyless preparation for examinations. Boredom, he acknowledges, is what turns young people away from language learning:

‘Quite often they are writing sentences that are boring to read and so must be boring to write. (...) It’s probably going to be good for their exams, but there is no kind of joy there...’

‘You can see it in their faces when they are not enjoying the lesson. Also, it makes the country you are trying to tell them about seem really one dimensional and boring, somewhere they would not really want to go to’. (Interview)

Questionnaire responses show that all students thought that creativity was very important in language lessons. The reasons they cited were that it made lessons more interesting, exciting and fun:

‘Really brings the language to life and makes it more memorable, meaningful and fun for the learners.’ (Nina).

‘Creative lessons encourage the students to think around the language, to participate more. It engages students and helps them to enjoy language learning more.’ (Kris).

The use of the word ‘more’ is indicative of the lack of what the students have identified as being desirable (enjoyment, meaning, engagement, life) in normal lessons. Creativity represents all that has been extracted from ML practice by the commodification of Education. Without it there is no motivation to learn language, a point illustrated by Chloë’s response to my question: ‘Is creativity important?’

‘Yes, absolutely. It’s the creativity that hooks the learning and gets the attention of the students to want to learn the language.’ (Interview)

The student teachers saw creativity as a way of combatting the negative image students often have regarding the difficulty of the subject:

‘The more you make it seem creative and fun and not such a hard subject, the more you break down those ideas that ‘this is hard and we can’t do this.’ So bringing in different elements, creative elements (...) helps the children.’ (Nina, interview)

Whilst the student teachers perceived creativity as the key to motivation, the difficulties they encountered in implementing it were evident. Lesson observations document how attempts to introduce creativity were thwarted by performative requirements which took priority, as described in my reflection on Diana’s lesson:

The video clip about ‘untranslatable words’ was delivered in a lively style by a young German native speaker accompanied by music. It was well chosen to arouse the pupils’ curiosity about the German language and immediately caught the attention of this group of 12 pupils of lower ability. The class have presented Diana with some challenges regarding motivation and engagement and purpose of the

video clip was to begin the lesson on a positive note and to tune the pupils into German again. However, it was rather hurried and the opportunity to explore the idea that some words cannot be translated was missed. The clip was shown with a very brief discussion, after which the lesson objectives were presented and copied down. There was no time available for any expansion or discussion about what they had seen in the video clip, which she had chosen, I imagine, with a view to broadening their understanding of what language is.'

When invited to discuss this after the lesson, Diana expressed regret that she had been unable to develop the creative aspects of the lesson further:

'It would have been nice toextend it a little. (...)There are pressures to get things done by certain points. Particularly for a trainee because I am told 'this is what you need to cover, this has to be done so I feel I have to do what (the teachers) are telling me to do rather than something I would maybe like to do.' (Interview)

Diana's attempts at providing her pupils with meaningful encounters with the foreign language are utterly eclipsed by technical procedures such as 'lesson objectives' which have been decided for her. Althusser's theory of interpellation proposes that such rituals comprise the 'material practices' of the Ideological State Apparatus. Diana feels compelled to conform to practices which she instinctively feels are not in the best interests of her pupils, which then provokes feelings of guilt. The need for pupils and their teachers to explore language in a way that is meaningful to them is completely subsumed by unnamed but powerful forces over which they have no control. This is evident in the passive voice employed by Diana: 'I am told'; 'there are pressures'; 'this has to be done'. They do not, however, seem inclined to question who decrees this or why it should be so. It is accepted as 'the way things are'.

The students demonstrated a keen awareness of the tensions between creativity and the performative requirements of both School and University. They focused on particular aspects of performativity as being barriers to creativity including: evidencing pupil progress; assessment; time and managing pupil behaviour. The idea that what is important is not what you actually do but what you are seen to be doing was understood to be a part of the job:

'It's the pressure of Ofsted because they have to see what you do. So what's more important for them is what is in their exercise books.' (Kris, group discussion).

I interpret this as evidence of the 'terror of performativity' (Ball, 2003) where individual performances serve as measures of productivity. The result is that teachers feel coerced into behaving in ways which they believe to be unethical through fear of losing their job or of letting colleagues down. Some students had been told by their schools that they needed to show 'progress' every lesson:

'Ofsted come in and you have to show progress within twenty minutes, and schools are so obsessed with showing progress within twenty minutes so that if Ofsted walked in they could appraise you...' (Sian, group discussion).

Sian acknowledges that this 'performance' of progress has no value beyond demonstrating the teacher's capacity to produce observable, measurable outcomes for the purpose of appraisal. It is an example of a momentary 'display of quality' (Ball, 2003, p.216) which has no connection with human interaction. Her disapproval is evident in her use of the word 'obsession', which is, ironically, a term describing irrational behaviour. The students

understood that the kind of demonstrable ‘progress’ required for the purposes of measuring teacher effectiveness is not always in the interests of pupils:

‘I certainly feel as a trainee that I am rushing. I can’t spend the amount of time I would like to on things. You feel like you are racing through. I do wonder actually how much the pupils take in because if they are flying through everything rather than really taking the time to learn something’. (Linda, interview).

The focus on measurable outputs rather than pupils’ learning results in an experience which is dissatisfying for both teacher and pupils. Linda, given the choice, would take time to ensure that the pupils really do ‘learn something’. However, the reality is that she is not free to choose (‘I can’t’), but is coerced into adopting practices she feels are harmful to her pupils.

Time constraints were viewed as barriers to creativity, both in terms of the actual lesson time available, which was seen as inadequate, and also the amount of time it took to prepare creative activities. Joe comments on how much he had enjoyed writing a poem to teach the conditional tense, despite the time it took:

Joe: I spent nearly three hours writing that poem, not because I had to but because I wanted it to rhyme. That was a silly idea, but ...

Tutor: Did you enjoy doing it?

Joe: To be honest, yes, sad though it is. I kind of forgot it was part of the lesson.
(Interview)

I interpret this feeling of enjoyment which Joe experiences as a moment of connection, a temporary suspension of alienation where the ‘Gattungswesen’ is not separated from work. In Marx’s terms his life and his work are one. He was able to immerse himself in the creative act of writing a rhyme for his pupils. It did not feel like work at all, but was pure joy. Joe clearly feels some shame in this (‘silly’, ‘sad’) as though the simple enjoyment of language is not permissible. The lack of lesson time was frequently mentioned as a barrier:

‘I also find that I sometimes get the comment if I do something creative, obviously it might take a bit longer, and then they’ll say: ‘well you could have done that a lot quicker if you had just given them the list.’ (Linda, group discussion)

The students worried about ‘wasting time’ or ‘losing time’; a pressure created by the notion of Education as Exchange Value; the teacher must provide ‘value for money’ by ‘producing’ as much as possible in the space of an hour’s lesson.

The students expressed a great deal of frustration with the narrow parameters of the curriculum:

‘The schemes of work (....) can be too prescriptive in that you NEED to cover all of these things. You feel as though if you don’t get through, you are going to be disadvantaging those pupils somehow. Whereas, I wonder how much getting through those things, how much of it they actually retain?’ (Linda, group discussion)

Linda finds herself in a dilemma. She has significant reservations regarding the effectiveness of teaching according to a prescribed curriculum but worries that she may disadvantage the pupils by straying too far from it. Joe’s views on the constraints presented by an assessment-driven curriculum are expressed as follows:

'They are certainly shackled by the curriculum and more so by the exam....which puts the clamps on you.'(Interview)

The vivid language he employs ('shackled', 'clamps') indicates that he experiences the restraints imposed upon him both cognitively and physically; an assault upon body and mind.

Evidence from my observations suggests that student teachers' efforts to engage students through creative practice have a positive impact on pupil behaviour:

'As they enter the room, it is clear that some pupils in this small group of Year 10 pupils have the potential to misbehave. Nina quickly engages them with an innovative activity using i-pads. They are intrigued and, as soon as they have logged on, are posting items of French vocabulary on the topic of 'Places in Town' which appeared on a 'Wordle' on the screen at the front of the classroom. There is an air of curiosity and creative energy as pupils contribute to the growing image on the screen. They are proud of the words they have remembered and Nina's strategy has paid off; they are ready to learn and she has won them over. They work hard for the remainder of the lesson.' (Observation of Nina)

However, the students identified poor behaviour as one of the main reasons teachers give for not being more creative. This applied mainly to pupils in lower sets. Althusser's claim that schools function to ensure that the rules of the established order are obeyed is evident in the unequal distribution of creativity in the classroom. It is reserved for pupils who behave:

'The teachers said that in the bottom sets there tends to be more behaviour issues, so 'I am not going to try something nice and creative and fun, we'll only give it to the ones that behave.' (Diana, group discussion)

Kris's school is in a socially deprived area and many pupils have emotional and behavioural difficulties. Some of the other students, who have not experienced such circumstances themselves, are shocked to hear that the pupils in Kris's school are not allowed to have scissors.

Kris: In my school, I was told that I have to be more creative than the kids. For example with some groups I wasn't allowed to give them scissors because their behaviour was quite...

(Several voices make exclamations of protest)

Kris: ... um.... challenging.

Steve: Yes, but you have got to trust them to give it a go.

Kris (quietly): It was quite a challenging school.

Quiet voice: Oh God!

Kris: But I think that they needed...they really were.... they had a hunger to express themselves, you know.

His parting remark, that these pupils have a 'hunger to express themselves' momentarily silences all conversation. Self-expression is not considered a priority, their behaviour is. The

students expressed concern that strict controls over pupil behaviour did not promote self-regulation and independence:

Steve: I was basically told 'don't get them all up and moving at the same time because it will just cause chaos the classroom'. In school S, they have got a lot of behaviour issues so their focus is on making sure that the kids are able to be quiet and with the teacher leading the.... They worry that if you leave them on their own for five minutes then they won't do anything, which in some cases that is true. If the teacher isn't there telling them exactly what to do then they won't do a single thing and then the whole class will turn to chaos.

Sian: But is that because they are so used to being told what to do that they can't actually do it by themselves?

(Voices of agreement)

Steve: I think that's a lot of it. So if you sit in front of the teacher answering questions, they are used to doing that, but if you ask them to do more....

Gemma: I think it should be about kids doing things for themselves. There is too much...

Amy: Spoon-feeding!

Steve seems to be experiencing a dilemma: whilst accepting the teachers' directives to 'make sure the kids are quiet' and 'tell them exactly what to do', he also questions whether a more creative or freer pedagogy would indeed result in the 'chaos' which they fear. He says that this might be true in 'some cases', but not all. Steve acknowledges the reductiveness of the pedagogy he is being inducted into and suspects that it has a negative impact on pupil behaviour. However, he feels compelled to follow the directives of his mentors. His tentative objections (and those of his fellow students who agree with him) do not seem to be directed at anyone in particular. There is an unwillingness to locate the reductive educational practices they have identified within individual teachers, or within themselves ('there is too much spoon-feeding'). Althusser's theory of 'interpellation', whereby the subject is 'called' into the material practices of the ISA, offers an explanation of how the individual is coaxed or coerced into adopting practices which uphold an unfair system. 'Spoon-feeding' is a strategy which is designed, quite deliberately, to eliminate free and creative thought, which threatens the established social order. The conversation above illustrates how the material practices of the ISA are manifested in classrooms, ensuring that pupils behave and do not have opportunities to express themselves or to think for themselves.

Concluding discussion

The research findings corroborate those of Ofsted with regard to the failure of teachers to 'bring the language to life'. However, I conclude from my analysis that this cannot be attributed to the student teachers themselves. The evidence shows that whilst the student teachers were acutely aware of the lack of 'life' in their lessons, they made attempts to restore it which were thwarted by performative requirements beyond their control. These attempts allowed them to experience moments of connection with their 'Gattungswesen' and to glimpse a different way of being. The students said that using music, art, drama, film and other forms of sensuous or aesthetic experience enabled them to make language learning

‘more real’ to their pupils. In other words, art (semblance) feels more real than school. This is because art, allows us to imagine ourselves as autonomous, particular subjects, if only for a moment. Art is not ‘real lived experience’ but an expression of it. For the student teachers creative practice represents an attempt to reconnect with the self (body, imagination) and with others (culture), to reinstate the ‘life’ which has been extracted from language learning through the process of Exchange Value. However, this enjoyable sense of connection with self and with others is a momentary experience; a temporary suspension of alienation where life and work are one. The elusiveness of these moments of connection is accepted increasingly by the students as they are inducted into the working practices of their school and through this process are interpellated into the ISA. Efforts to make it better, to subvert the authoritarian, oppressive ISA also act to uphold an unjust system. Althusser argues that the maintenance of the status quo, that is the reproduction of the relations of production, is dependent upon the ‘attitudes of the individual-subjects occupying the posts which the socio-technical division of labour assigns to them in production, exploitation, repression...’ (Althusser, 1971/2001, p.124). The ‘ideological representation’ of Education within which we work, has distorted our human relationships, coercing us into prioritising that which is measurable above that which is human.

I conclude from my findings that neoliberalism has wrought changes both to the practice of language teaching and to the identities of practitioners. The student teachers relinquished significant aspects of their own identities in order to adopt the image of a teacher which has been decided for them, that is someone who is competitive and compliant. Language teaching, as it is currently configured within the discourses of global economic competitiveness, does not inspire young people to undertake the lifelong project of learning to communicate in another language. The imperative to learn other languages and to understand other cultures comes not from economic competitiveness but from a shared need for co-operation. For change to occur there needs to be a shift in those discourses which might allow for the development of a curriculum which is centred on human interaction as opposed to economic imperatives which are beginning to look dangerously outdated.

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